GOD'S PARTNERS
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Psalm 8
Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31
Matthew 28:16–20

"You have made them a little lower than God. . . .
You have given them dominion. . . ."
Psalm 8:5–6 (NRSV)

The divine word strives to inspire us to see life not from the narrow confines
of fleeting 80-year-life expectancy. Rather, we are to find our place in a world
that was created eons before we came into being,
by a Creator who existed eternities before this universe was shaped;
a world whose idealized perfection may well be realized ages after we are gone from the scene.
If humans can see the world even a little bit from this perspective,
they will recognize their modest place; their judgments will be less distorted
by the skewing that power, wealth, social standing, and religious membership generate.
They will be more able to find their proper role in the perfecting of the world.
They will act closer to the norms of love, justice, and dignity,
which are the proper responses to the value of their fellow creatures.

Irving Greenberg
For the Sake of Heaven and Earth:
The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity

I dreaded report card day. For some youngsters, it was an occasion of triumph, the sheer joy of victory, the sure affirmation of personal accomplishment and worth. Some couldn't wait for report card day, the delicious experience of bringing home the yellow envelope with the orange

folded card inside, your name and class on the front, grades inside, proof positive of your worth as a human being, and placing it triumphantly on the kitchen table for your parents to see.

For some, it was not that at all. It was always a mixed experience for me. The grades were generally all right. My nemesis was the back page: the section of the report card called “Citizenship.” There was a list of offenses on the back of the card next to which the teacher placed an X if you were out of line behaviorally. Offenses like “Doesn’t pay attention,” “Talks too much,” Disrupts the class.” I had a lot of Xs in those categories. Sitting still, being quiet, and paying attention were never my long suit—still aren’t for that matter. My parents noted these failings but didn’t seem to mind too much. What got me in serious trouble was the citizenship category “Not working up to potential.” My father could handle talking too much and disrupting the class. But not working up to potential was a serious offense. I suppose it had to do with his Depression-era experience of putting dreams aside because of economic necessity. In any event, my brother and I were given both the burden and the gift of high expectations. “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.” “Do your best. If you fail it’s OK so long as you do your best.” “You can be anything you want to be.”

I have concluded that the greatest gift is the gift of high expectations. The people I value most now are precisely the ones who saw more in me than I saw in myself and made my life a little uncomfortable at the time by expecting more from me than I was producing.

It can be perverse as well, of course. Some expectations are impossibly high. Some expect and demand so much that children grow into adults who spend the rest of their lives trying to live up to those expectations long after their parents are gone. But done correctly, which is to say in love, high expectations are a precious gift.

I always read what Brent Staples has to say when his editorials appear in the *New York Times*. I’m interested in Staples because he grew up in poverty, in the African American community in Chester, Pennsylvania, went to college and then graduate school at the University of Chicago. Against incredible odds, Staples made it and wrote a book about it. *Parallel Time* begins with an account of his return to Chester to identify the body of his younger brother, Blake, who was murdered in the process of dealing cocaine. Staples reflects on the situation of far too many young urban males:

> The violence that stalks the cities today is a ghostly presence, made of self-loathing and rage. It haunts the souls of teen-age boys who are fatherless and lost, so much so that guns and gangs are the only solace. By fourth grade, those boys are finished at school and have jumped some mental track. By sixteen they are so angry that they "smoke you" for staring at them.

Why did it turn out differently for him? Staples knows every time he reads a newspaper account of a drive-by shooting, a drug bust, that it could have been him. The difference was a few people who saw his potential and simply would not give up on him: a high school English teacher, a Quaker student worker, a professor who urged him to give college a try.

It is a gift when someone believes in you, has a high opinion of your possibilities, wants you to be all you can be, loves you enough to push you and expect much of you. And one of the boldest ideas in the history of ideas is that everyone has someone like that, namely the one who created us.

It is a revolutionary idea actually, and it is there on the very first page of the Bible. Human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God. Furthermore, they are given dominion—which means responsibility—for the rest of creation. That is a novel, unique, revolutionary idea: a God who puts limits on God's own sovereignty and power in order to make room for the creatures; a God who loves the creation and calls it good, lovely, beautiful, and then steps back to hand responsibility over to the part of the creation God loves best of all, the woman and the man, who together reflect the image of God, the human beings who are given dignity and value and infinite worth by God and are now responsible for creation.

Irving Greenberg is a Jewish theologian and philosopher, an Orthodox rabbi who writes boldly and creatively about Judaism and Christianity. Greenberg finds that the two faiths have far more in common than most of us know. His intriguing suggestion—shared, by the way, by many Christian theologians—is that Christianity doesn't replace or supersede Judaism but lives beside it and that Judaism doesn't need to fear Christianity but affirm Christianity for spreading Jewish ideas about God and the covenant and the value of all human life. And, Greenberg says, Jews and Christians both understand their purpose as joining God in the healing and perfecting of the world. We are, he says, God's partners. The highest, holiest vocation to which any of us can aspire is to live as a partner of God, to live out God's expectations for us,

which, Greenberg says, means exercising our God-given power and responsibility for the world and for our own lives.

We know for sure that things go badly when we forget the image of God in others—politically, socially, economically. And things go badly when we forget the image of God in ourselves. Sin, the theologians tell us, is not just pride and selfishness, thinking too highly of ourselves, but not thinking highly enough. Sloth, the ancient church called it, one of the seven deadly sins. It means not caring, not engaging the world, being a passive victim rather than a responsible agent.

There was a phrase in the old General Confession of Sin that we have long since excised, but it belongs in there:

> Most holy and merciful Father: we acknowledge and confess before thee;
> our sinful nature prone to evil and slothful in good.

"Slothful in good": that's at least as much our problem as intentional evil. The primal crisis in the garden of Eden is not sex; it's a refusal to be responsible. Eve allows a serpent to persuade her to eat the fruit. Adam allows Eve to talk him into it. When they are caught, they continue to refuse to be responsible. Adam blames Eve: "The woman—she made me do it." Eve blames the serpent.

One of the most important books of our time is Hannah Arendt's post-World War II study of Adolph Eichmann, *A Study in the Banality of Evil.* Eichmann was the Nazi official in charge of logistics and transportation for the Third Reich's project of arresting, imprisoning, and executing 6 million Jews. After the war, he was tracked down, arrested, returned to Israel for trial, and executed. In her study, what Arendt, the scholar, discovered was not a moral monster but an ordinary man—the banality of evil. Eichman simply did his job with maximum efficiency and minimum personal responsibility. That is why he is such a frightening figure.

The Holocaust continues to haunt us, not only because it revealed the human capacity for evil, but even more disturbingly the human tendency to avoid being responsible. Rabbi Greenberg says the real question about the Holocaust is not, where was God? God was where God ought to be—with the suffering, oppressed, dying. The real question is, where were God's

people—who averted their eyes, who knew but did not know, who decided that they couldn't do anything so didn't try?

One who did was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose name and story you know. Bonhoeffer, theologian, pastor, pacifist, returned from America to his native Germany to join his people in their travail. He became a counteragent in the German intelligence agency, the Abwher, and eventually joined a plot to assassinate Hitler. The effort failed. Bonhoeffer was arrested and executed a few days before the end of the war. What you might not know about Bonhoeffer was that he was one of the most promising theologians of the day. His specialty was ethics. And the centerpiece of his ethical thinking was responsibility. Perhaps observing the way the German intelligentsia—professors, judges, lawyers—looked away from the evil of Nazism, Bonhoeffer wrote, "The sin of respectable people is fleeing from responsibility."

Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer said, calls us to discipleship in the world, a "worldly discipleship" that lives intentionally in the world and accepts responsibility for the life of the world. For Bonhoeffer, Christian discipleship begins not in a spiritual retreat but in responsible citizenship.

I was taught mostly that ethics means knowing what to say no to, what to avoid. It was Bonhoeffer who taught me that at least as important, maybe more important, is saying yes, accepting responsibility, living responsibly, being God's partner.

God calls you to be responsible for your own life and how you use it, your resources and how you spend and invest and give, your community, your church, your family.

In our time the issue surfaces regularly along the fault line between religion and science, and increasingly politics influenced by religion.

Just two months ago the nation's attention was riveted to the case of Terri Schiavo, a young woman who had existed for fifteen years in what medical science calls a persistent vegetative state. Doctors were certain that her condition was irreversible. Her husband said she had told him she did not want to be kept alive should something like this happen. He decided that the feeding tube should be removed. Her parents objected. The courts repeatedly supported her husband. Before it was over, Roman Catholic and Evangelical Christians weighed in on the side of the parents, to keep her

alive no matter what. The majority leader of the Senate did a diagnosis without ever seeing her and Congress tried to intervene.

It is not simple. Just when I thought it was, a friend corrected me by telling me about his sister, who in a bout of deep depression persuaded Dr. Kevorkian to assist her in committing suicide. It is not simple. But after strenuous struggle and careful and prayerful consideration, it comes down to responsibility, I believe—our responsibility for our own lives and sometimes, when tragic circumstances put us in a situation no one wants to be in, responsibility for the lives of our loved ones. I do not believe that to decide not to take extraordinary measures to sustain life is an attack on anyone's faith. It is certainly not an assault on a culture of life. It is to value human responsibility.

In the middle of the intense media coverage, Anna Quindlen spoke for many of us. She wrote, "There are those of us who believe that under certain conditions the cruelest thing you can do to people you love is force them to live."

Quindlen, a practicing Roman Catholic, said the case was a primal demand for a sense of personal control (or responsibility) in the face of intrusive government and intrusive religion—"strangers who think holding a crucifix like a blunt instrument makes them righteous when it only makes them sanctimonious" (*Newsweek*, 4 April 2005).

It emerges in the public debate about stem-cell research. Dr. Francis Collins, a very distinguished scientist who heads up the National Human Genome Research Institute, is also a devout Christian who believes scientific discovery is like worship. Dr. Collins says, "The study of DNA does in fact provide profound evidence in favor of evolution to create human beings"—a process he calls "amazingly elegant." Dr. Collins also believes the mandate to heal is at the heart of the gospel (*Context*, April 2005).

Again, it is not simple. Stem cell research has enormous possibility to learn about and treat diseases such as Alzheimer's, diabetes, spinal cord injury, Parkinson's, MS. It is still very preliminary, but medical science sees great hope. The problem is that the stem cells in question are extracted from human embryos—not much larger than the head of a pin. There are hundreds of thousands of frozen embryos in storage, created for reproductive purposes and not needed. They will be discarded—all of them. Some people oppose the use of these embryos—instead of being discarded

as inappropriate human intervention in life, a form of abortion. Some say it is a matter of human responsibility—exercised carefully and faithfully to advance the cause of hopeful healing. Again, to take this position is not to attack religion; it is to come to a different ethical conclusion on the basis of religion and the central notion of responsibility.

John Mulder, former President of Louisville Seminary, once said that we Presbyterians think we're responsible for everything. We do have a lot of opinions on almost everything. When we gather nationally we comment on Israel and Palestine, minimum wage, the environment, tax reform, American foreign policy, and, of course, human sexuality. It's guaranteed to be controversial and always is. After years serving as a Presbyterian minister, one comes both to look forward to and to dread meetings of the General Assembly, knowing when word gets out about what the commissioners said and did, part of your congregation is going to be unhappy and you will spend a lot of time explaining, comforting, pleading with them not to quit. We decided a few years ago to meet biennially instead of annually and part of the effect this year will be that Presbyterian ministers across the land will not have to spend the summer explaining what the General Assembly did. Of course, many of us are still dealing with what the General Assembly did last June regarding divesting from Israel.

There is not a one of us who hasn't asked, "Why do we do this?" It's not as if the Congress and the President are waiting by their telephones to hear what the Presbyterian General Assembly has to say about the war in Iraq or oil imports or free trade. It's not as if our own members are waiting for the General Assembly to speak before forming their own opinions. Are we simply ecclesiastical masochists who aren't happy unless we're unhappy and arguing?

The answer is Psalm 8 and Genesis 1: made in the image of God and given, by God, dominion. We Presbyterians try to take that seriously, whatever it costs us, and cost us it does. Among all the churches, we're the ones who understand our vocation as responsible citizens, God's partners in creation. From the beginning, with John Calvin's reformation of the economic and political structures of sixteenth-century Geneva, to colonial Presbyterian support for the War for Independence, to Presbyterian involvement in the civil rights movement, right up to our most recent foray into the treacherous arena of public policy, we have attempted to be responsible participants in the world—not from a partisan political perspective, but

because we know ourselves to be given responsibility by God to be no less than God's partners in creation.

I love something Vaclav Havel, then President of the new Czech Republic, said in an address to the United States Congress:

> The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else but in the human heart . . . in human responsibility. . . . The only backbone of our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my firm, my country, my success—responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged.

Sometimes it is hard to imagine, I know, but God created you and you have within you, no matter who you are, the very image of God. I know it is hard to imagine sometimes, but the image of God in you is your dignity and value and infinite worth, given to you by God, and no one can ever take it from you. And most difficult of all to imagine sometimes, I know, is that God calls you, no matter who you are, to be God's own partner in perfecting and healing the world—starting with responsibility for your own life.

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars that you have established;
> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
> mortals that you care for them?
>
> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
> and crowned them with glory and honor.
>
> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands.
>
> Amen.